A strategy for increasing news media coverage of tobacco and health in Australia

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ABSTRACT
Background: In many nations, government fiscal restraint is reducing the ability of public health authorities to mount mass-reach health information advertising campaigns. Strategies for increasing news coverage of health issues, and thereby contributing to policy advocacy, are well recognized, yet under-explored in health promotion research. Objective: To increase news coverage of smoking and health issues by issuing media releases about research judged as newsworthy and important in contributing to tobacco control policy debates. Method: Research reports selected for their potential newsworthiness were promoted in news releases and their news ‘hit rates’ in New South Wales (Australia) metropolitan media over 5 weeks were compared with the background coverage of tobacco control issues over the same period. Results: Fifty-eight of 283 (20.5%) news reports on tobacco in the study period were generated by the six media releases. Conclusions: News reportage of tobacco control and other public health issues can be increased significantly by the strategic use of news releases alerting journalists to research reports that embody recognizable news values. This is an inexpensive strategy with great potential to advance public health objectives.

INTRODUCTION
In Australia, public health information campaigns using purchased advertising are occurring less frequently and for shorter periods than in the halcyon campaigning days of the 1980s, which saw large-budget, government-sponsored campaigns in areas like HIV/AIDS (Morlet et al., 1993), road safety (Powles et al., 1993), asthma (Comino et al., 1997) and tobacco control (Macaskill et al., 1992). Today, in a protracted era of restraint on public health expenditure and the associated exuberant championing of the commodification of solutions to public health problems (Renaud, 1975; Chapman, 1996; HMRSR, 1998), public health advocates face increasing challenges in gaining direct (paid) access to the mass media, unless they have a product or service to sell that can recoup the costs of advertising. In Australia, government funding for tobacco control has fallen from peak levels in the late 1980s (Hill et al., 1995). The current national quit campaign has had an average budget between 1994 and 1998 of $A6.1 million, allowing it to broadcast its latest hard-hitting messages for only a matter of weeks (Hill et al., 1998).

However, paid public awareness campaigns are only one way of drawing large-scale public and political attention to health issues (Chapman, 1999). Australian news and current affairs programs often feature coverage of health and medical issues (Chapman et al., 1994b), as do TV ‘soaps’ and info-tainment programs (Tulloch and Lupton, 1997). In one sample year, 38% of all front pages of the Sydney Morning Herald carried at least one health story (Lupton, 1995). Of these, health service delivery stories ranked first after smoking, cancer and miscellaneous health stories about well known people. An earlier Australian study found that news about smoking was also extensively reported in the press (Chapman, 1989).

Public interest in medicine has grown considerably over the past 30 years, and the media
have capitalized on this interest by increasing their coverage of health and medical issues. For example, the *New York Times* increased its coverage of medical articles by 425% between 1969 and 1988 (Wilkes, 1997). Table 1 shows recent audience sizes in New South Wales (population 6.34 million) for health-related soaps and infotainment programs, as well as evening TV news and current affairs programs. Individually and collectively, these programs expose mass audiences to new information and editorial framings of ideas about health issues to an extent that is unparalleled by any other means of reaching such numbers.

There is some evidence that coverage of smoking in the news media can be influential in promoting smoking cessation. For example, Reid *et al.* (Reid *et al.*, 1992) identified unpaid media publicity as the main cause of the 30% decline in smoking prevalence among British males in the 20 years after the publication of the first report on smoking and health by the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1962. During this time, anti-smoking information and publicity was almost wholly disseminated via news reportage and commentary, with major government health promotion campaigns not commencing until the 1980s. On a smaller scale, a US evaluation of a week-long local newspaper series on smoking cessation, which caused ~4% of readers to quit for at least 1 week, was calculated as having an impact equivalent to that which would have resulted from the establishment of 380 dedicated cessation clinics (Cummings *et al.*, 1987).

News coverage of health issues can also have important impacts on political perceptions of what issues are important and should be funded or subject to political action, such as legislative reform. For example, in 1994, the then Australian Federal Minister for Health, in explaining why the national research budget for prostate and testicular cancer was $150 000 a year compared with HIV/AIDS research, which attracted $13 million, said ‘But it isn’t fashionable, it’s not at all in the front pages, it’s not sexy to have testicular or prostate cancer so you don’t get a run’ (Dow, 1994). This statement from Australia’s (then) most senior health politician attests to the importance of ensuring that public health issues maintain a high public

### Table 1: Ratings and audience size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Highest ranking attained</th>
<th>Highest NSW audience (of all Sydney programs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical soaps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ER</td>
<td>1995–1996</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>696 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Hope</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>552 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>174 900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiac Arrest</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>156 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Finlay</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>220 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health info-tainment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good medicine</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>600 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPA</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>613 800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex/Life</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>347 500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>492 600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early evening news</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 News</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>498 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC News</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>341 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 News</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>338 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 News</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>250 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBS News</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>46 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current affairs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 Minutes</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>509 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Current Affair</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>473 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today Tonight</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>326 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>321 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.30 Report</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>249 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Corners</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>183 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Correspondent</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>174 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>126 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lateline</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>55 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*Source: Sydney Morning Herald, May 1998.*
profile through the media if they are to be judged as worthy of political attention.

While many health agencies routinely issue media releases to the media and researchers report general satisfaction with the way in which their research is reported (Phillips et al., 1991), efforts at increasing news media reportage of health issues remain curiously under-analysed. To determine the feasibility of generating regular unpaid mass media coverage of tobacco-related issues, an Oxfordshire (UK) health promotion team distributed media releases, photographs, letters and articles on smoking to three local newspapers over 24 months (Mindell, 1997). Of 82 smoking items published during this period, 64 (78%) resulted from the project team’s releases. This paper discusses a pilot study of a strategy to increase news coverage of tobacco and health issues in metropolitan news media in New South Wales, Australia. The results are discussed against the perspective of how the selection of items were considered in terms of both their potential contribution to tobacco control advocacy, and their likely reception by editorial gatekeepers for newsworthiness.

**METHODS**

Tobacco issues judged to be both potentially newsworthy and likely to contribute to current tobacco control advocacy objectives were located using two methods. First, for each of the 5 weeks of the study, Current Contents was searched using the search terms ‘tobacco OR smoking’. This provided dozens of research reports and author contact details from the weekly updates published in >7500 research journals. From these, candidate reports judged as likely to be newsworthy were short-listed. Next, the World Wide Web was searched for news of reports and events on smoking that might be newsworthy. From this process, one report judged to be likely both to attract news attention and to advance an explicit tobacco control policy objective was selected to be fashioned into a news release.

Copies of the research papers were obtained from their authors, who were contacted by e-mail for permission for us to publicize their paper’s findings. E-mail addresses of the authors were located by searching websites of the author’s employing institution for a staff list.

A media release was drafted and a comment on the significance of the report was sought from the lead author and/or a local expert. This comment and contact details were provided on the release. Media releases were faxed to the news-rooms of the major metropolitan newspaper, radio and television stations in New South Wales on mid week days. A total of six media releases were distributed in this pilot study.

Press, radio and television reportage of tobacco and health issues were obtained from a commercial media monitoring service so that the ‘strike rate’ for attracting coverage of our releases could be compared with the total coverage of smoking and health issues in the week following each release (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media release</th>
<th>Newspaper articles</th>
<th>Radio news spots</th>
<th>Television news spots</th>
<th>Total coverage and percentage of coverage given to releases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Smoking ban in Californian bars does not reduce custom (Ott et al., 1996)</td>
<td>0 (15)</td>
<td>7 (20)</td>
<td>0 (2)</td>
<td>7 (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Smoking fathers increase cancer risk in offspring (Ji et al., 1997)</td>
<td>1 (8)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>1 (5)</td>
<td>4 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Smoking may increase prostate cancer death (Rodriguez et al., 1997)a</td>
<td>0 (28)</td>
<td>0 (50)</td>
<td>0 (7)</td>
<td>0 (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Call for government action on tobacco pesticides (<a href="http://rampages.onramp.net/~bdrake/#index001)a">http://rampages.onramp.net/~bdrake/#index001)a</a></td>
<td>0 (28)</td>
<td>7 (50)</td>
<td>0 (7)</td>
<td>7 (85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Major passive smoking review (OEH, 1997)</td>
<td>0 (23)</td>
<td>1 (38)</td>
<td>0 (6)</td>
<td>1 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Smokers outside buildings smoking ‘harder’ (Chapman et al., 1997)</td>
<td>7 (26)</td>
<td>29 (37)</td>
<td>3 (9)</td>
<td>39 (72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>(8) 100</td>
<td>46 (154)</td>
<td>4 (29)</td>
<td>58 (283)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                        | 8%                 | 30%              | 13.8%                | 20.5%                                                   |

*aThese releases were issued in the same week.
RESULTS

Table 2 summarizes the number of occasions that news coverage precipitated by each release was published or broadcast, expressed against the denominator of the total number of items about tobacco control broadcast or published in each week of the release. Each release in this pilot study is detailed below.

1. Smoking ban in Californian bars (Ott et al., 1996)

*Tobacco control objective:* to increase public and political support for smoke-free indoor hospitality venues.

*Media advocacy objective:* to introduce information into public debate showing that bars would not lose customers if they went smoke-free, thus eroding a key barrier to political support for smoke-free bars.

*Perceived newsworthiness:* in Australia, as elsewhere, policy debates about banning smoking in indoor hospitality venues such as bars and restaurants have been hotly contested. A key platform of opposition to such proposals has been that such venues would lose smoking customers. The tobacco and hospitality industries have actively promoted this notion, which has proved pivotal in several policy debates. A key finding of this study was that a hard-drinking Californian ‘sports’ tavern did not lose any trade after a local ban on smoking was introduced. We considered this report would prove newsworthy in that it provided a body blow to the local tobacco and hotel industries’ repeated forecasts of economic catastrophe should a ban be introduced in Australia. California, traditionally framed as being at the cutting-edge of modernity, had banned smoking in the last bastion of smoking: the male-dominated sports bar.

*Results:* The item was reported seven times on radio, representing just under one in five reports on tobacco across all three media in that week.

2. Smoking fathers increase cancer risk in offspring (Ji et al., 1997)

*Tobacco control objective:* to encourage more men to quit smoking, particularly when contemplating fatherhood.

*Media advocacy objective:* to introduce a new piece of information about yet another danger posed by smoking.

*Perceived newsworthiness:* there has been a long history of news interest in the harm that smoking mothers can cause their babies *in utero*, with the subtext often focusing on notions of bad mothering and selfishness. We considered this report to be potentially newsworthy in that it promised an intriguing new twist on the harms wrought by smoking. The findings reported from this Chinese case-control study described increased childhood cancer rates in the offspring of smoking fathers. With relatively few Chinese women smoking, and sperm damage from tobacco use being already reported, the results were biologically plausible. We sensed that the newsworthy aspects of the report would lie in it ‘turning the tables’ on the traditional ‘blaming’ of mothers for risking harming their babies as a result of smoking. It promised to open up a whole new discourse about paternal pre-conception responsibilities, perhaps attracting the attention of some journalists who might be attracted to the idea that men should share responsibility for quitting with their female partners.

*Results:* again, just under one in five of all reports on smoking that week were generated by our release.

3. Smoking may increase prostate cancer death (Rodriguez et al., 1997)

*Tobacco control objective:* to encourage more men to quit smoking.

*Media advocacy objective:* to publicize the relationship between smoking and a hitherto unreported adverse health outcome predicted to be of great concern to many men.

*Perceived newsworthiness:* this study reported a fatal prostate cancer rate ratio for current smokers of 1.34 (i.e. a 34% increase compared with non-smokers). We judged that this story had potential to ‘piggy back’ on the growing media interest in prostate cancer, the second leading cause of cancer death in Australian males, and a cancer that has been largely devoid of preventable risk factors.

*Results:* despite recruiting a prominent local professor who often appeared in the media and...
had recently written a book on prostate cancer, this release was not picked up by any news media. It may have been that journalists considered the relatively low relative risk reported to be insufficiently dramatic, or that prostate cancer has not yet acquired invincible newsworthy status.

4. Call for government action on tobacco pesticides (http://rampages.onramp.net/~bdrake/#index001)

*Tobacco control objective:* to add momentum to calls for more comprehensive labelling of cigarette packs and to add another dimension of concern to smokers’ apprehensiveness about their tobacco use.

*Media advocacy objective:* to frame tobacco as anything but a ‘natural’ product, but as one that was polluted with pesticides that smokers were not being told about.

*Perceived newsworthiness:* pesticide residue in food is known to be of greater concern to consumers than nutritional issues such as fat and fibre (Brewer et al., 1994; Resurreccion et al., 1995). Pesticides, being ‘unnatural’ and produced by industrial corporations, satisfy most of the criteria for predicting community outrage about risk (Sandman, 1989). On locating a large website devoted to pesticides in tobacco (http://rampages.onramp.net/~bdrake/#index001), we judged that themes about non-disclosure to consumers, and lack of standards and routine testing would prove newsworthy.

*Results:* only seven radio reports resulted, in a week that featured many press reports about passive smoking.

5. Major passive smoking review reinforces call for bans (OEH, 1997)

*Tobacco control objective:* to build public and political support for a legislated ban on smoking in enclosed areas.

*Media advocacy objective:* to publicize that—yet again—another major scientific review had declared passive smoking to be harmful.

*Perceived newsworthiness:* the release on the World Wide Web of the report on passive smoking of the Californian Environmental Protection Agency coincided with a spate of news coverage about passive smoking in Australia arising from efforts by the local tobacco industry to suppress a government expert report (Jamrozik et al., 1997). We anticipated that alerting the Australian media to a major overseas report would most likely attract interest with reasoning such as ‘the American public have been allowed to see a major government report on passive smoking … why can’t the Australian public see a local version?’.

*Results:* our judgement proved overly ambitious, with only one report resulting.

6. Smokers outside buildings smoking ‘harder’, study finds (Chapman et al., 1997)

*Tobacco control objective:* to reinforce community understanding of smoking as a form of drug dependence and thereby to contribute to the debate on regulation of cigarette ingredients such as nicotine.

*Media advocacy objective:* to provide research information on a commonplace sight (smokers outside buildings).

*Perceived newsworthiness:* the study showed that office smokers smoking outside buildings—a common sight in Australian cities for the past decade—were smoking ‘harder’ than people smoking outside in more leisurely settings. Three aspects of the study seemed likely to be newsworthy.

- The study provided evidence that far from being cool and sociable office ‘rebels’, taking advantage of their status as smokers to allow them to take time off work, many smokers were desperate addicts fleeing from offices to engage in near-frenzied smoking behaviour to satisfy their cravings.
- Were policies that drove smokers out of buildings inadvertently harming smokers by causing them to smoke ‘harder’ as observed? That is, had tobacco control policies blundered?
- How much time were smokers spending outside buildings, and was this fair to non-smokers who had no need to take repeated ‘time-out’ episodes from work?

*Results:* this release attracted 39 news reports, making it nearly twice as reported on than all the other releases combined.
DISCUSSION

In the 5 weeks during which the six news releases were issued, more than one in five of all monitored news reports on smoking issues were generated by the releases issued in this pilot study. These findings are consistent with studies of the origins of reportage, which have shown that much contemporary journalism is stimulated by receipt of media releases and other efforts to get into the news. Our ‘hit rate’ in major metropolitan media, with their greater access to electronic news gathering, was considerably lower than the 78% reported by Mindell in regional newspapers in the UK (Mindell, 1997). However, provincial newspapers have a reputation for being relatively easy targets for news generated locally, as such stories do not have to compete for editorial attention with national and international news.

Media releases 3, 4 and 5 were distributed during a time when there was high media coverage of passive smoking and the potential effects of smoke-free public place legislation in New South Wales. This high background level of reportage (the mean number of reports was 76 over these 2 weeks) was 52% higher than the average coverage rates for the 5 weeks. This may have jeopardized further coverage of smoking in our releases, with editors and journalists perhaps judging ‘we’ve had enough smoking stories this week’. Public health advocates cannot always predict when competing stories will relegate their own to the editorial ‘spike’.

Radio covered our stories more than newspapers or television news. This probably reflects the greater number of news bulletins on radio compared with television, and the smaller number of newspapers ($n = 3$) in our study sample than radio stations ($n = 10$).

Locating the newsworthy stories and research papers involved weekly computer searching sessions, each taking <15 min, particularly once the search parameters had been bookmarked. All lead authors of the scientific papers granted permission to distribute the media release. The most time consuming aspect of the process was our attempts to persuade local Australian experts to comment on local implications of international research papers. Four such people refused, indicating the low priority that some researchers give to contributing to public dissemination of research results (Gascoigne and Metcalfe, 1997).

Some stories that were identified as potentially newsworthy were reported in the media before a media release could be generated. Journalists, especially with the advent of the internet, are increasingly able to locate interesting journal articles/news stories quickly without assistance from outside groups, especially when they are reported in widely read journals such as the Lancet and British Medical Journal (Entwistle, 1995). However, there are a great many newsworthy reports published in specialized journals that do not have their own publicity divisions, and so which seldom come to public attention.

News values determine journalists’ selection of stories (Gans, 1979). There are many subtexts commonly found in health stories that satisfy these values [e.g. bizarre and unusual phenomena, popular myths being turned on their heads, moral tales, ‘nasty things at the bottom of the garden’ stories, and the eternal story of human attempts at cheating mortality (Chapman and Lupton, 1994a)]. However, dissemination of media releases that concisely and clearly explain why an issue is important, making a news article easier to write, can influence story selection (Entwistle, 1995).

The process of locating newsworthy stories and issuing media releases is an extremely cost-effective way of generating selected reportage that can expose hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people to information about public health issues. News coverage of a human rights review of the historic separation of Australian Aboriginal children from their families (Mervyn Smyth and Associates, 1998) found that the huge coverage generated would have cost $A15.5 million if the equivalent space had been purchased as advertising time and space. Public health advocates have the ability to assist researchers, who often give low priority to publicity, in disseminating significant findings through unpaid publicity. This has the potential to influence knowledge levels, public opinion and policy change.

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